

TIME

THE WEEKLY NEWSMAGAZINE



FASHION DESIGNER CLAIRE MCCARDELL

TIME

THE WEEKLY NEWSMAGAZINE

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TIME, MAY 2, 1955

PUBLISHER'S LETTER

Dear TIME-Reader:

EXPERIENCE paid off last week for TIME. CORRESPONDENT JOHN BEAL of the Washington Bureau is an old hand at covering the Department of State. As a result, when DOS announced that Assistant Secretary



Walter Bennett

JOHN BEAL

WALTER S. ROBERTSON and ADMIRAL ARTHUR W. RADFORD were hurrying to Formosa for routine consultations. Real raised skeptical eyebrows and went to work. He phoned Robertson, who refused to let him accompany him to the airport. Rushing to the airport alone, Beal questioned DOS men waiting to see the party off. They were noncommittal. But Beal, circulating and asking circumspect questions, picked up the clue that sent him racing back into the maze of Washington officialdom.

At week's end, he was the only newsmen in Washington who had uncovered the real and urgent reason for the sudden Robertson-Radford trip, reported in NATIONAL AFFAIRS "Grim Deeds."

ACROSS the world, another TIME veteran, DWIGHT MARTIN, who has ranged the Far East since 1948, threaded through a maze of a different kind to report the Bandung conference story. Upset at Bandung (see FOREIGN NEWS). "The principal feature of any international conference is confusion," he cabled. Bandung was no exception. Martin worked day and night, fathoming the multilingual confusion, and

fighting his dispatches through already overtaxed cable offices—all the while sustaining himself on such peppery Indonesian fare as meat with chili, potatoes with chili and ferns with chili, washed down with a cloyingly sweet cider.

ASSOCIATE EDITOR OSBORN ELLIOTT's most notable previous excursion into the world of feminine fashion can hardly be said to have helped him as he wrote this week's cover story (his 14th) on the U.S.'s famed Fashion Designer CLAIRE MCCARDELL.

One fall day three years ago, Editor Elliott impulsively stepped into a Madison Avenue shop and bought his wife Deirdre a size 10 dress for \$40. It was, he recalls, a black taffeta with puffy short sleeves, a full skirt and stringlike belt.

At a party last week, Deirdre Elliott happened to wear the same black taffeta, still as dashing and smart as ever. After weeks of looking at Claire McCardell creations, interviewing Claire McCardell about her dresses, dreaming about them and finally writing about them, Elliott stared at his wife and suddenly exclaimed: "Hey—that's a Claire McCardell dress!" "Yes, dear," said his wife in that pointedly patient way women often have.



Walter Doan

DEIRDRE ELLIOTT

Cordially yours,

James A. Linen

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COOL AND COMFORTABLE. six young models surround Designer, McCardell, showing a collection of her 1955 summer

styles: two bathing suits, a beach dress, two cocktail dresses, an evening gown. All have the casual, functional American Look.

FASHION

The American Look

(See Cover)

It was the end of April, and as the soft air turned the land green, American women were suddenly aware of a truth that bursts upon them every spring: Summer was at hand, and they did not have a thing to wear. Therefore, they were out in force in stores last week in search of the cool—and new—clothes to make the hot weather bearable. Tall girls looked for dresses that would make them seem shorter; short girls wanted to look taller. The plump wanted eye-foolers that would seem to take off inches, the thin all wanted to look round, firm and fully packed. The young wanted to look sophisticated and the sophisticated wanted to look young. All wanted to look different than they had ever looked before. And to a woman, they knew exactly what kind of clothes would turn the trick—or so they thought.

At Manhattan's Lord & Taylor, a young housewife twisted in front of a three-way mirror, inspecting a cotton dress. "Just what I want," she said. "Smart, you know, but casual." Said a shopper in Los Angeles' May Co.: "This year I'm going to concentrate on shirts, cashmere sweaters and knit dresses." A determined huntress in

Atlanta's J. P. Allen knew exactly what she wanted: "Casual clothes with a gay feeling."

Comfortable & Colorful. In 1955, more than ever before, U.S. summer clothes are gay and casual. There are Orlon sweaters, dresses in Dacron, nylon and other wonder fabrics in every color. There are dresses of wispy silk and tough denims, terry-cloth shirts, and shorts in everything from calfskin to velvet. Toreador pants, once worn only by the brave (and beautiful), are as common as pedal-pushers and Levi's. One big 1955 craze: sweater-like cotton knits in everything from beach robes to low-priced cocktail dresses.

There are checks and stripes and flowery prints, and even polka-dot underwear. And 1955's summer clothes are flexible, as the result of a continuing boom in "separates." There are a thousand different kinds of blouses that look as well with a skirt at a dinner party as with Bermuda shorts at a picnic. In California, bathing-suit makers Cole and Rose Marie Reid have gone so far as to put out "evening convertibles"—swimsuits that can be made into evening dresses by adding fluffy tulle skirts. Price: \$250.

The choice is broad and the fashions varied. But whatever they buy, most American women this summer will have one thing

in common: a style that has come to be known the world over as the American Look.

The Meaning of Elegance. The American Look has developed almost unnoticed by the women who wear it. "Elegant dress," wrote Economist Thorstein Veblen in 1899 in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, "serves its purpose of elegance not only in that it is expensive but also because it is the insignia of leisure." But in the U.S., the meaning of elegance has changed as much as the meaning of leisure. It is a leisure of action—barbecue parties in the backyard, motor trips along country roads and across the country, weekend golf and water skiing. From America's lively leisure has evolved a new, home-grown fashion, as different from Paris fashion as apple pie from crepes suzette. Paris can still claim its title as the custom-fashion capital of the world. But the French still design for Veblenesque leisure. Their clothes compliment the designer, whereas America's are made to compliment the wearer. A young Manhattan mother put it simply: "When I get dressed up, I have little time to make up to the dress; I want the dress to make up to me."

Genuflect to Paris. The person who understands best how American women want to look is a shy Manhattan designer named Claire McCardell. Says she: "Clothes may



DESIGNER MCCARDELL & PARSONS SCHOOL STUDENTS
Every season, the moment of truth.

Martha Holmes

make the woman, but the woman can also make the clothes. When a dress runs away with the woman, it's a horror." Designer McCordell speaks with authority, for she started the casual American Look. Even among fashion editors, who genuflect to Paris before every deadline, she is considered unique. "Claire started the feeling for Americana," says *Vogue's* Babis Simpson. Agrees Diana Vreeland of *Harper's Bazaar*: "She gave the American woman a look of her own, and she did it without outside pressures."

Claire McCordell's creations are dedicated to the propositions that 1) clothes should be made to be worn in comfort, and 2) only comfort can create sense-making style. Her clothes are functional, simple and clean of line. She likes "buttons that button and bows that tie." She is, says Dallas Retailer Stanley Marcus, "the master of the line, never the slave of the sequin. She is one of the few creative designers this country has ever produced."

She borrows styles from no one, at home or abroad; when she is in Paris on vacation, she visits no collections lest she be influenced by what she sees. Almost everyone can buy her clothes, which range from bathing suits and play clothes (\$10 to \$50) to dresses (\$29 to \$100) and suits and coats (\$89 to \$150). Anyone can wear them, but they look best on what countless ads have presented as the ideal American beauty—tall, slim, long-legged.

Salads & Mambos. Making clothes with the American Look is no simple trick. U.S. women, says President Hector Escobosa of San Francisco's I. Magnin, "don't want their sports clothes to look like overalls, but they want them to act like overalls." While Claire McCordell and

other top designers lead the way, the U.S. fashion industry is now busy turning out garments to keep up with the fast modern pace—dresses that are as at home in the front seat of a station wagon as in the back seat of a Rolls, as comfortable in the vestibule of a motel as in the lobby of the Waldorf, as fitting for work in the office as for cocktails and dinner with the boss. Most of all, they must be practical. Sports clothes must swing as easily on the laundry line as on the golf course, and evening clothes must be designed as much for tossing a salad as treading a mambo.

The American Look has had its influence abroad, particularly in Italy, where it has profoundly influenced the designers of sportswear. Paris has also tried its hand at the style, believing, as Christian Dior said, that *la mode sport* in America is "beyond doubt excellent."

The demand for casual clothes has also become a mainstay of the vast and complex fashion business. It is a risky business, yet all over the nation upwards of 14,500 women's-apparel manufacturers are taking the risk. They employ 450,000 people and turn out \$6 billion worth of goods a year. Of this total, Claire McCordell (through Townley Frocks, Inc.) accounts for only about \$1,800,000 (plus \$100,000 in royalties from such sidelines as sunglasses, gloves and jewelry). But she is one of the biggest names in the business.

St. Louis, Chicago and Philadelphia are all important garment-making centers. Around Dallas, some 70 firms are turning out \$40 million worth of women's clothes a year and selling 35% of their output outside the Southwest. In California,

where designers were once willing to try anything ("crazy pants" in wild harlequin designs and 6-ft.-round straw hats) just to get talked about, fashion has come of age. Now 1,200 women's-apparel manufacturers, including such leaders as Pat Premo, Rudi Gernreich and Georgia Kay, are grossing \$350 million a year, and selling 60% to 75% of their wares east of the Rockies.*

But Manhattan is still the biggest fashion center of all, and Seventh Avenue (from 34th Street to 40th Street) is its hub. There 8,500 women's-apparel manufacturers do 67.3% of the business—and they are a harried lot. Piracy is a stock in trade, and fashion rumors (both true and false) are the currency. Are tunics in? Will Dacron last? Is the two-piece bathing suit coming back? Gulping pastrami sandwiches and dodging careering hand-carts packed with their rivals' dresses, Seventh Avenue's denizens must decide. Their decisions are based on nothing more than the gossamer whim of the female mind, and if they decide wrong, they go broke.

Cold Ears. No one on Seventh Avenue is more aware of the tremendous risks in fashion than Claire McCordell, who with her company has had more ups and downs than the hemline. But no one seems less concerned about the rumors, or less worried about where whim will carry fashion next. Says she: "I've always designed things I needed myself. It just turns out that other people need them, too." At 50, Designer McCordell is still her own best model. She is 5 ft. 7 in. tall, has a trim figure (130 lbs.), honey-blond hair and sparkling blue eyes.

To Designer McCordell, garments must have a reason. After shivering on ship-board during a transatlantic trip in a flimsy, French-designed evening wrap she turned out a wrap in tweed. She went skiing, got cold ears, did a wool-jersey hood. After lugging a trunk and five suitcases around Europe, she decided to save space by making dresses in parts, switching the pieces around for variety—a bare top and covered-up top, for example, to be worn alternately with shorts, slacks or short or long skirts. That was one of the fashion world's first important experiments with "separates," now a mainstay of American sportswear design.

Rivets & Diapers: The list of McCordell firsts stretches back 20 years. She was the first to modernize the dirndl skirt (1938) and the first to use trouser pockets and pleats in women's clothes (1938). She was the first with the widely copied "Monastic" dress, a full and shapeless forerunner of the pleated Grecian sheath and all the other unwaisted dresses. It seemed to have no form. But when it was belted on, it did great things for the female figure. It was McCordell who first started using blue-jean stitching for design in rough

* Last week the Federal Trade Commission brought suit, charging 51 Los Angeles manufacturers, 32 contractors and two labor unions with trying to control 20% of the sportswear market by illegal trade agreements.

denims (1943), and she was the first with the "riveted look," using work-clothes grippers for fasteners and ornamentation. She introduced the "diaper" bathing suit—and in 1942 she started the craze for ballet slippers. Necessity mothered that invention: unable because of wartime shortages to get the proper shoes for her showroom models, McCardell put them all in fabric Capezio ballet slippers. The fad caught on, and she still suggests designs for many Capezio shoes.

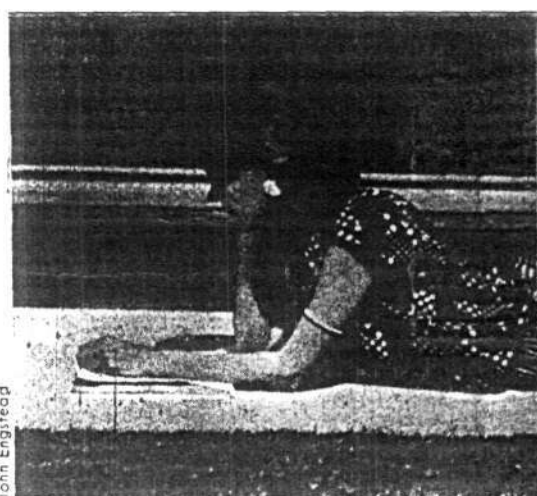
While McCardell styles are simple, they can be identified by such things as spaghetti-like ties, big brass hooks and eyes, and a daring use of color. In her 1955 summer line, brick-red shorts (\$12) are made to be worn with a long-sleeved orange blouse (\$23); a boxy, pullover beach shirt (\$18) is done in orange and hot pink. There is a Persian crushed-cotton dress of turquoise, moss green, red and chartreuse (\$40), and a straight-from-the-shoulder swim dress of brass-colored cotton with an orange tie at the neck (\$39.95).

Above all, Claire McCardell designs are so functional that they stay in fashion; her basic designs, in fact, change but slightly from year to year. Two years ago Los Angeles Art Dealer Frank Perls decided that her clothes were so unique that he collected 20 years of McCardell fashions and put them on exhibition in his gallery. Recently Designer McCardell

got a fan letter from a customer who bought a red wool McCardell dress, size 16, for \$40 in 1948. It was altered to a size 12 in 1949, re-altered to a size 18 to take care of added weight in 1951, re-altered to a size 12 and then to a 16 again in 1952, and back to a 12 in 1953. It landed in the wash by mistake, suffered "considerable shrinkage," was cleaned several times, taken apart, stretched, pulled and realigned into a size 10. Last year a bottle of hair-tinting shampoo was spilled all over the dress. The owner's report for spring 1955: "Dress is navy blue with silver buttons, fits perfectly; fabric is as handsome as ever, the styling as chic as ever—and [it] draws comments from people all the time!"

Stick Men Gone Wrong. Claire McCardell works in a tiny cubbyhole above Seventh Avenue, surrounded by button boxes, swatches of material, scrapbooks and half-finished dresses. She has an artist's sense of color and a sculptor's feeling for form; wherever she goes, she keeps both eyes peeled for new ideas. "With these dames," says her partner, Adolph Klein, "you don't know where they get their inspiration. It may be from the crack in the wall." With Claire, most of the inspiration comes from the fabrics that salesmen are forever trying to get her to use.

She will feel a fabric, hold it to the light, pull it on the bias, pleat it in her



GEORGIA KAY, riding along with the rest of California's booming play-clothes

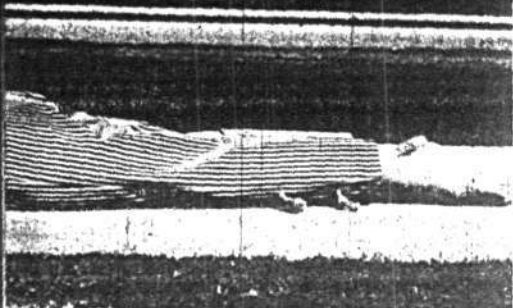
hands and crumple it. If she likes it, she will buy a few yards and put it on a shelf. When inspiration strikes, she dashes off a simple little sketch that looks, to the layman, something like a child's matchstick drawing of a man. But to the seven sample hands who work in the room next door to her cubbyhole office, the stark lines are enough directions for them to start draping.

As they do, Claire McCardell pops in and out of the sample room, making changes as her coats and dresses take shape on the dress forms. If a sample is not working out as she planned, she or-



PAT PREMIO of California achieves youthful look with a white dotted-swiss afternoon dress, which is embroidered with geraniums.

McCARDELL classic is shirtwaist dress in bright cotton plaid with full skirt, pockets and bodice that is cut on the bias.



industry, has a lounging outfit of blue and white striped pants and a drawstring top.

ders it junked; if it satisfies her, she sends it across the hall where patterns and dresses are made. (Outside contractors account for 70% of Townley's output.)

Since Claire McCardell, like all designers, works months ahead, she gets a hint of how well her collection will sell long before the public ever gets a chance to buy. The preliminary verdict is pronounced by buyers from all over the U.S., who crowd into the showroom of Townley Frocks and, order blanks in hand, watch models parade past in the newest McCardell creations. To Designer Mc-



Cardell, the big moment comes when a buyer says excitedly: "That's wonderful Claire. How soon can you deliver it?"

Paper Dolls. Designer McCardell comes by her deep feeling for an American way of design not only by birth but by the surroundings of her early environment. She was born (May 24, 1905) in historic Frederick, Md., where Francis Scott Key practiced law and where the Barbara Fritchie legend sprouted. Claire's father, Adrian Leroy McCardell, was an Evangelical and Reformed Church elder and Sunday-school superintendent, a 33rd-degree Mason, a Maryland state Senator, a member of the state tax commission, and president (like his father before him) of the Frederick County National Bank. Her mother, Eleanor, was a Southern belle who still lives in Frederick and keeps a picture of Robert E. Lee on the wall of her living room.

At school, Claire's grades were low, but at home, her flair for clothes showed early. She cut paper dolls out of her mother's discarded fashion magazines, traipsed around after the family seamstress. She started making her own clothes in her teens, sometimes using sketches she made of theatrical costumes on occasional family trips to Washington's National Theater.

Rosebuds & Tragedy. Claire spent two years at Frederick's Hood College, then quit, over her father's objections, to switch to Manhattan's Parsons School of Design (where she now is a part-time consultant). She studied for a year in Paris, working part time as a tracer of fashion sketches, and learned "the way clothes worked, the way they felt, where they fastened." Back in New York, she got a job painting rosebuds on lampshades for a store, did some modeling at B. Altman, became a designer in a knitgoods company at \$45 a week—and was fired after eight months.

She got another \$45 job as a model and sketcher for Townley Frocks, Inc., then owned by Henry H. Geiss, a harassed veteran of Seventh Avenue's fashion campaigns. A tragedy provided a break. Less than a month before the spring showing in 1931, Townley's designer drowned while swimming; it was up to Claire to turn out a collection. Says she: "I did what everybody else did in those days—copied Paris. The collection wasn't great, but it sold." Flushed with confidence, Designer McCardell began to experiment. But often her designs were too advanced for the market. She did a dirndl skirt, for example, and no one wanted it. Geiss, now retired, sadly recalls: "Two years later they were all over the place."

On the Bias. In 1938, Claire had her first big success—and speeded up the trend to casual clothes—with her Monastic dress. Until then, American women had little choice of styles between a cotton house dress and an afternoon

TINA LESER'S exotic styles are typified by handkerchief-linen sheath with an overskirt.



CATALINA'S "Cleopatra" bathing suit is in terra cotta, black and yellow cotton.

Ferrisgraves



CLARE POTTER swimsuit is, in Persian Paisley print, has surplice wrap to match.



MONASTIC STYLE of 1938 inspired a rash of copies, spurred the casual trend.



HOODED BEACH COAT of 1946 had large pockets and "blue-jean" stitching.

Philippe Halmon—Life



dress. The Monastic dress gave American fashion a new flexibility that it has never lost. Loose-hanging and cut on the bias,* it did not sell at first. Then a buyer from Manhattan's Best & Co. casually asked for a New York exclusive, and ordered 50 Monastics in wool and 50 in faille. Best's ran a full-page ad on the dress, 24 hours later ordered 100 more in each fabric; within days, cheap copies were flooding the market. Says Geiss: "That dress revolutionized the whole dress industry." It also toppled Townley Frocks.

When it came time to work up her winter cruise collection, Claire McCardell started using the same loose lines. Geiss tried to steer her off, arguing that the model had been copied to death. But Claire would not listen. Result: Geiss lost all that he had made on the Monastic dress and, on the verge of a nervous collapse, closed up shop.

"Go Shoot Craps." Claire went to work for Hattie Carnegie, but her dresses were too simple for the rich tastes of the Carnegie carriage trade, and in 1940, after a year and a half, Designer McCardell quit by mutual agreement. Then, after turning out some potboiler designs for a small manufacturer, she heard from Geiss again. He had recovered his health and his nerve, and found a new partner in Adolph I. Klein, a suave, confident ex-salesman who never seems perturbed by the risks of the business. Geiss and Klein needed a designer, and asked Claire's most recent boss how she had done. Said he: "If I were you, I'd go shoot craps with the money. It's not as much of a gamble as Claire McCardell." Nevertheless, Claire was hired back to Townley. Says Klein: "In this business, you have to be exciting or basic. I figured we were too small to be basic, so we had to be exciting."

Designer McCardell saw to it that they got excitement. Breaking away from the Paris trend, she started designing dresses without shoulder pads. Geiss and Klein had to dash around to buyers assuring them that shoulder pads were available for those who wanted them (most did, since McCardell was at least five years ahead of the field). But Townley, with Klein handling the business side, made money, and has continued to do so ever since.

Its success was due not only to Claire McCardell's talent but to her sharp eye for opportunity. When World War II closed down the Paris fashion market, one retailer said: "The American garment industry is now in a position to show whether it can make a silk dress or whether it will be a sow's ear." Designer McCardell made a silk dress with a special wartime twist—a long kitchen-

* Still a favorite McCardell trick. Instead of cutting material straight up and down, or straight across, with the threads, McCardell often cuts it diagonally. The bias cut wastes material, but it gives a dress more flexibility, makes it adapt to the shape of the body.

← T-SQUARE JACKET of 1954 can be washed and worn without ironing.

dinner dress of tie silk, with apron to match, for women who were forced to be their own maids. When *Harper's Bazaar* asked her to make something in which women could do their housework and still look smart, Claire obliged with the "Popover," a wraparound, coverall sort of dress in denim that sold for \$6.95. Townley sold 75,000 of the first Popover model, and McCardell has had a variation of the Popover in every collection since.

She designed a uniform for the Red Cross Motor Corps, brought back the knit bathing suit, and after the war brought out a full, long-skirted style (when Paris later did the same, it was dubbed the New Look).

In 1943 she took time out for a step that she had overlooked in her busy, professional life. She married Texas-born Architect Irving Drought Harris, and started making a home for him and his two children by his earlier marriage (to the late Jean Ferris granddaughter of California's Sugar King Claus Spreckels). Designer McCardell did not try to change the tastes of her new husband. Their eleven-room Manhattan apartment is decorated with masculine hunt prints and heavy mahogany furniture.

Fleeting Joy. While Claire McCardell goes her independent way, she has plenty of competition in the casual-clothing field, since the American Look has spawned a whole school of native designers.

Among the top are Clare Potter, whose sleek, ladylike clothes are done in dramatic colors, priced a notch above McCardell's; Tom Brigrance, an exponent of fit and form, who "constructs" clothes with a feminine look for the small, rounded figure; Vera Maxwell, whose simple clothes have an English flavor; Tina Leser, who designs exotic play clothes, using foreign and art themes; Sydney Wragge, who uses color-coordinated silks, linens and tweeds, attains a classic, custom-made look in his sportswear; and Carolyn Schnurer, who does gay, colorful collections sometimes inspired by foreign travels.

All these designers are merely the vanguard of a fashion army that is still growing, and is only beginning to fill the American woman's demand for clothes for her casual way of life.

As U.S. women swarmed through the shops sampling all the wares last week, there came to each a moment of joy, when she knew that what she had found was just the thing. "It's cute—and it *does* something for me," burbled a wisp of a girl in Manhattan's Bonwit Teller as she twirled in a filmy summer cocktail dress.

But such joy would be fleeting. For in their designing rooms and factories all over the U.S. last week, Claire McCardell and all the other makers of the American Look were hard at work. They were doing their best to make sure that in a few months American women will furrow their brows and again be stuck with a great truth: "Here it is fall, and not a thing to wear."